



Christie Capps

A Reason  
to Hope

A Pride & Prejudice Novella

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From the Author:

Already Available - From Christie Capps

ALREADY AVAILABLE - FROM J Dawn King:

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*For those who love a happily-ever-after*

**B**lood!

Fitzwilliam Darcy crumpled the linen square in his hand, unwilling to allow anyone to see the evidence of his illness. Flinging the stained handkerchief into the burning fire, he rested his arm against the mantel, his free hand clenched into a fist.

His father had died five years prior at the young age of seven and forty from what the surgeon referred to as a cancer of the abdomen. The pain of watching the long-term failure of a powerful body had almost destroyed the son. At the end of his life, George Darcy had coughed up blood.

His cousin, Anne de Bourgh, suffered from consumption. Lately, Darcy had noted spots of red on her linens after a coughing fit. According to her physician, his cousin's future was grim.

Slamming his fist against the hard wood, a sense of panic enveloped Darcy.

In the three months since rescuing his young sister from an almost-elopement with a scoundrel, there had been repeated bouts of stomach pain that felt like his chest was on fire. Meals he typically enjoyed in the past now made him miserable. At night, he could barely sleep. When his head finally hit his pillow, the suffering increased.

Looking into the flames, Darcy counted back to when he and Georgiana had rushed back from Ramsgate in July. In the twelve weeks since they had been home at Pemberley, he had ruined four handkerchiefs. Two of those four had been in the past se'nnight alone.

Turning to gaze out the large window next to the fireplace, he studied the view.

He loved Pemberley, the estate where he had been born and raised. To him, the stone walls, the aged oak trees, the constantly flowing river that ran across the southern boundary, and the hills and peaks of the property represented permanence. It was only the life contained within those walls that was fleeting, like the morning mist over the moors.

*Good Lord!* What was he to do?

Rubbing his hand over his mouth, Darcy considered his

responsibilities.

His estate employed over two hundred. His properties inside and outside of England were many. His investments were almost endless. He was the co-guardian of a sister who had recently reached her sixteenth year. Her other guardian, their cousin, Colonel Richard Fitzwilliam, was in the active military. She rarely saw Richard.

Moving to his desk, he removed a copy of George Darcy's Last Will & Testament. Attached to the file was a letter addressed to him from his beloved father. Unfolding the parchment, Darcy was flooded with all the emotions he had struggled with upon reading the letter for the first time—heartbreak, an overwhelming anxiety, panic, and agony.

*Mr. George Darcy, Esquire*

*Pemberley, Derbyshire*

*My Dear Son,*

*The surgeon tells me I will soon be joining your mother in the grave. Therefore, I want to take this opportunity to tell you how proud I am of you.*

*Since you were a lad, you have willingly accepted every task I have assigned you. Your devotion to Pemberley and to Georgiana will serve you both well.*

*What has impressed me the most about you, Son, is not just your attention to duty, but your honor. I have witnessed the sacrifices you have made for the sake of the Darcy name. You have not gone off and foolishly pursued the same course as your worthless peers. No, your attention to your studies, your humbly accepting suggestions from those with more experience, and the attention you give your sister have been reasons for joy.*

*William, what burdens my mind now during these final days is your future. You see, I am confident you will do the best for your sister. Will you do the best for yourself? You cannot if you choose to travel the path of life alone.*

*Your mother was a strengthening aid to me on more than one occasion. When a weighty decision was in front of me, she wisely allowed me to talk matters out, giving her opinion when she felt I was veering away from my duty. Daily, she reminded me of my blessings.*

*Pemberley is a wonderful place to raise a family.*

*With this in mind, I will remind you that the continuation of our estate in the Darcy family is by a male heir. You must have a son, William. Georgiana cannot inherit Pemberley on her own. Should you not marry and produce an heir, well, I do not want to consider the consequences, but they would be dire indeed.*

*Marry well, my son. Should you not find a young lady who would be your true partner in town, look outside the ton to a gentleman's daughter from the country. Find a woman who is kind, who will challenge you, who*



would be a proper mistress of Pemberley, and in whom you would find delight.

*Raise and train your children to be exactly like you, William. Only then will you know the happiness and peace you have brought me.*

*I remain your loving father,*

GD

Folding the parchment, Darcy reached into his pocket for his handkerchief, only to remember it was no longer there. Resting his forehead in his hands, his elbows planted firmly on the desktop, Darcy pondered how quickly his life's purpose had changed. Until Ramsgate, he felt he walked in a straight line at a constant pace toward the accomplishment of the goals his ancestors had achieved. With this illness he was facing, he needed to move faster, to run if necessary.

For five years he had danced to the tune of those in the marriage mart. Not once had he been tempted to engage in a second dance with any of the ladies he had stood up with. How could he marry any of them if he was not able to be in their presence for longer than thirty minutes? Impossible!

His eyes settled on the post received only that morning. On the top was an easily identifiable letter from his good friend, Mr. Charles Bingley. Breaking the seal, he found exactly what he needed: an invitation to Bingley's newly leased country estate in Hertfordshire.

Darcy would do as his father directed him. He would find a gently born wife from the country who would be his full partner until he was no longer able to manage estate business. Then the burden would fall upon her. Yes, he would discover a paragon with a lovely countenance and personality, whose kind heart and ready wit would make her presence in his company tolerable.

*Hah!* In his dreams, perhaps.

Most likely, he would meet the same sort of avaricious female as would be found in the *ton*. Well-dressed females who were in reality blood-sucking debutantes, trained by their mothers to claw at him with their talons, hanging on until he could not escape without harm.

The fire that had been simmering in his gut flamed into a conflagration. Rubbing at his chest, he drank the lukewarm tea he had abandoned before his coughing fit.

He had no choice, Darcy had to admit. He needed a wife and an heir. Soon!

Drawing paper from the desk drawer, he first listed the candidates he had felt even a modicum of physical attraction to. Then he crossed off those who bored him to tears within five minutes of being in their company.

Setting the quill back on its rest, he considered the four names remaining. They were well-dowered, with excellent connections, and

conducted themselves well in society.

Growling, he also recalled why he had rejected each of them.

Dropping his head in his hands, he wished he was not in his current situation. Inhaling deeply, he sat up, his spine stiff.

He would accept Bingley's invitation for a fortnight in Hertfordshire, then he would return to London and place the names of the four contenders in a hat. He would draw a name randomly, making the chosen one an offer of marriage.

*There! That settled the matter.*

His plan tipped upside down not long after he arrived in Meryton, a small farming town in Hertfordshire. During his fortnight with Bingley, his purpose changed, his opinion changed, and his future was set.

Fitzwilliam Darcy, Esquire, decided, without wavering, that Miss Elizabeth Bennet of Longbourn would be his salvation.

Upon their first encounter, Darcy had overlooked Miss Elizabeth. A few days later at a gathering at Lucas Lodge, her quick wit, her delightful laughter, and her attempts to constrain her younger sisters into more ladylike behavior set her apart. However, it was when she arrived at Netherfield Park to care for her ailing sister, Jane, that Darcy finally admitted to himself that Miss Elizabeth might be without equal.

The first evening, she refused to dally at a table with two wealthy eligible gentlemen. Instead, Miss Elizabeth removed herself to return to attend to Miss Bennet. The second evening, upon evidence of her sister's recovery, she joined the company after dining.

"You write uncommonly fast," Caroline Bingley, his host's unmarried sister, praised Darcy as Miss Elizabeth strolled into the room.

"You are mistaken. I write rather slowly," Darcy replied. He covertly watched Miss Elizabeth as she took up a needlework project, a small smile on her face, undoubtedly at the inanity of the exchange.

Where Darcy knew Miss Bingley's intent of capturing him as her matrimonial prize, he had no clue about Miss Elizabeth's goals. She appeared to be uncommonly content with her circumstances. Yet how could that be so? Her father's estate was entailed to a distant cousin. Each of the five Bennet girls would receive an exceedingly small portion upon marriage. Little more would come their way at the death of their parents. None of the daughters had been presented at court or had a season in town.

"Mr. Darcy, sir!" Miss Bingley's nasal tone finally caught his attention. "You are not attending."

"I beg your pardon," he easily apologized.

"Surely you were not distracted by a letter to your sister to the extent you failed to continue the conversation." Caroline Bingley attempted a tease only to fail spectacularly.

Darcy admitted, "I was thinking of something else."

"Oh, do share, I pray you, for we will all be astonished by the depth of your intelligence, will we not?" Caroline Bingley smirked, waved her hand in the air to dismiss the attention she sought, then

looked to the other guest in the room to see if the lady was at all impressed.

“Miss Elizabeth, how can you choose not to participate in our stimulating conversation? You sit quietly like a servant in a corner, working at her craft to earn a few extra coins for her pocket.”

The insult was painfully obvious.

Darcy’s instinct was to barge in and defend Miss Elizabeth. Nonetheless, something held him back. At her response, he was grateful he had held his tongue.

“Miss Bingley, might I inquire, if you do not mind, whether you know of Sir Martin Frobisher?” As evidence of her continued good manners, Miss Elizabeth placed the needlework aside, devoting her full attention to her hostess.

“Sir Martin Frobisher?” Miss Bingley’s nose was now pointed directly at the ceiling. “Why, who does not know of him?” She preened as she looked away from her guest to Darcy. “Mr. Darcy, do *you* know of Sir Martin? Surely he is in the same sphere as the Darcys and the Matlocks. In fact, I believe he has an estate close to Bath, does he not?”

He wanted to chuckle. His uncle, the Earl of Matlock, had recently reached the age of sixty. Darcy was not yet eight and twenty. Sir Martin had been dead for over two centuries. No, Sir Martin Frobisher was not a recent acquaintance.

Gazing at Miss Elizabeth, he could not miss the twinkle in her marvelous eyes. What was she up to? Why had she mentioned the name? Lifting his right brow, he tipped his head slightly, the universal gesture of a curiosity demanding satisfaction.

With a slight movement of her lips, Elizabeth said, “I am unsurprised at your hearing of the man for he was quite famous several years ago. You see, he was an adventurous sort who was devoted to the progress of England. Traveling repeatedly across the Atlantic seeking the Northwest Passage, he discovered what he thought was a rich source of gold. Can you imagine his excitement at the potential for great wealth?”

Miss Bingley put her hand up to her throat to stroke the precious metal of her heavy gold necklace. The glee at imagining a pot of gold somewhere in Canada waiting for detection lit her face, highlighting her avariciousness. “Yes, I can imagine.” She sighed longingly.

Miss Elizabeth continued her tale. “Sir Martin loaded three ships with a total of two hundred tons of the ore. The assay value at his return was over one thousand pounds. Encouraged by the results, and encouraged by the Queen, he sailed back to Canada with a fleet of ships. This time, they carried over thirteen hundred tons of ore. Can you conceive of the value he would receive once back in England?”

“Oh my!” Miss Bingley was ecstatic. “I would buy a new gown for every day of the year, with accessories and jewels to match, with those funds.”

“I do imagine you would always look your finest, Miss Bingley.” Bowing her head to her hostess, Miss Elizabeth added, “It is an unfortunate matter of history that those tons of ore produced little actual gold. The rest was pyrite. The metal looks like gold but is comparatively worthless.”

“Oh!” Miss Bingley’s countenance fell. “Why ever did you tell me this? What did you hope to attain with this sorry story?”

“I merely was considering how often appearances are deceptive. You spoke of Mr. Darcy writing quickly. His expressed opinion was that he was slow. I suspect we shall never know the complete truth of the matter.” Miss Elizabeth stood to leave the room. “Pardon me, I need to return to Jane.”

With a curtsy, she was gone.

Darcy wanted to laugh when Miss Bingley blandly stated, “What an odd sort of girl.”

Ever one to pursue peace, her brother noted, “I am most impressed with the ladies of Longbourn. Miss Bennet is an angel. Miss Elizabeth appears to have a keen understanding beyond fabrics, lace, and social niceties. I find them both refreshing.”

Caroline scoffed. “You know nothing, Charles.”

When Miss Bingley joined her sister in watching Bingley and Mr. Hurst play cards, Darcy was left alone to consider the exchange. He had recognized Miss Elizabeth’s purpose immediately. It had nothing to do with the letter he was writing. No, Miss Elizabeth put Caroline Bingley on notice that the second daughter from Longbourn was far from being a lowly maid of all work. Instead, she was well-educated, able to defend herself with her intelligence without resorting to meanness, and shrewd enough to recognize the lack of character in her hostess.

*Brava, Miss Elizabeth!*

At that moment, Darcy decided he would do whatever he needed to make her his bride.

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Not two hours later, Darcy struggled to catch his breath. The burning in his chest and throat eventually resulted in him coughing until he cast up his accounts. He mopped his mouth with the cloth provided by his valet, the tell-tale sign of dark red streaking the linen.

As he wiped his brow with a cool, damp cloth, the physical discomfort and the weight of his future consumed him. Unwanted

tears trailed down his cheek. Brushing them away with his hands, he rested his head against the wall.

In his heart and mind, he knew it was too soon to offer for Miss Elizabeth. Yet his circumstances demanded that he not wait any longer.

He sighed deeply at his situation. Darcy knew his inability to converse freely with someone he had recently met would hinder any attempts he made to seek her agreement.

Determination had him standing. Perseverance had him walking to his writing desk. Stubbornness had him pull several sheets of parchment from the drawer.

His hand quivered, the remnants of the physical weakness that had assaulted him. Calling his valet, he asked for water. When it was placed on the table within arm's reach, Darcy said, "Thornton, I would ask for your discretion in delivering a note to Miss Elizabeth Bennet, who is here caring for her sister."

"Yes, sir." Thornton's brows shot up his forehead. "I will gladly perform this task."

When his valet shifted from one foot to the other, Darcy asked, "Yes?"

Clearing his throat, his eyes firmly planted on the carpets covering the floor, Thornton said, "I beg your pardon, sir. I know better than to gossip with the staff. But you should know how well the maids speak of both Miss Bennets. They are considered to be the finest ladies in the shire. That is all I have to say."

Darcy studied the man who knew him better than any other. "I see. Well, yes, you should not listen to idle chatter. However, in this instance, I am pleased with this report." Darcy drained the glass, the water feeling cool on his abused throat. "If I am successful, Miss Elizabeth will become my wife. If I do not meet with success, I will act as my cousin the colonel does and think of alternate strategies until I leave Hertfordshire a married man."

Nodding his agreement, Thornton added, "I understand that Miss Elizabeth enjoys reading, long strolls observing nature, and family. If you do not mind me saying so, I believe Pemberley will be the perfect situation for the young lady."

"I appreciate your insight, Thornton. Indeed, as I learned shortly after her arrival, the distance between her family's estate and this one is three miles. Her considerable effort to reach her sister impressed upon me that she is exactly the sort of woman I need to wed." Darcy mused, then grinned. "Far better would it be to have a loving wife care for me as my illness progresses than you, correct?"

With a small smile, Thornton departed.

Inking his quill, Darcy considered all that he needed to say, then

began to write.

Elizabeth Bennet had just finished repeating the conversation from downstairs to Jane when there was a soft knock on the bedchamber door. Surprised to see an unknown male standing on the other side with his hand extended, Elizabeth instinctively reached for the parchment he held.

“For you, miss.” He bowed and left.

Turning the folded paper over, front to back, she found both sides were blank. There was no seal. Whoever sent the missive trusted the delivery man not to peek at the contents. Looking down the hallway, she waited until he tapped on the fourth door down from where Jane rested. The door opened, and the mystery man stepped inside. Elizabeth stepped back and returned to Jane’s bedside.

“Who was it, Lizzy?” Jane’s raspy voice came from the bed.

“I do not know,” Elizabeth replied honestly.

Was the man Mr. Bingley’s valet? Was the note for Jane from their host? If so, it was highly improper.

No, the man had specifically indicated the parchment was for her.

Returning to her sister’s bedside, Elizabeth teased, “Perhaps it is a note from Father. Or it might be a summons from the butler to break my fast earlier than my usual time. Mayhaps it is an order from our esteemed hostess to vacate the premises forthwith.” Elizabeth chuckled. “What information do you imagine it might contain, Jane dear?”

“I cannot know. Pray open it so we both discover the tidings.” Jane eagerly sat up in bed, adjusting the pile of pillows behind her for comfort.

Exaggerating her need to clear a throat that did not need cleared, Elizabeth unfolded the paper and began to read aloud.

*Mr. Fitzwilliam Darcy*

*Pemberley (currently of Netherfield Park)*

*Dear Miss Elizabeth,*

“What? He calls me dear?” Elizabeth glanced at Jane, who slapped her hand over her mouth to contain her surprise at the identity of the sender.

“Continue,” Jane pleaded.



“Very well.”

*Pray do not be disturbed by the method I have used to contact you. My valet, Thornton, is discreet. I imagine you will share this with Miss Bennet, who I assume is trustworthy as well.*

*Before I make my official request, I would tell you of myself.*

*Due to the loss of both of my parents, I am master of a vast estate in Derbyshire. Pemberley and its accompanying properties encompass almost ten square miles. In addition, I hold smaller parcels in Scotland, Ireland, and an estate in Kent. As late as two years ago, I purchased a large stand of timber in northern Canada. I have no debt.*

*When my father died five years ago, I became guardian to my young sister, Georgiana. She is eleven years younger than I am. There is no one on this earth dearer to me than her.*

*The Darcy family has lived in Derbyshire for three centuries and specifically at Pemberley for two. Perhaps one of my ancestors knew Sir Martin Frobisher.*

Elizabeth snickered.

*What I will tell you now I ask that you hold in confidence. Not one person outside of Thornton knows my current trial. Not even my sister is aware.*

“Lizzy, perhaps you should read the rest quietly to yourself. I would not want Mr. Darcy to be disturbed at my knowing his problems.” Jane slumped back into the bedclothes. “I will rest until you finish.” Closing her eyes, her breathing was steady within a few minutes.

Elizabeth waited until Jane was asleep before continuing, her curiosity burning inside.

*My father was diagnosed with a cancer of the stomach less than two years before his death. His symptoms included burning and tightness in his chest. Toward the end, he coughed blood.*

*An event occurred three months ago that caused an upset in my family. Almost immediately after, I began experiencing the same symptoms as my father. Over the past se’nnight, my condition has worsened. I...*

Elizabeth folded the paper into the same shape she had received it from the man who must have been Mr. Darcy’s valet, Thornton. Standing, she paced the floor until her mind was settled with how best to proceed.

Tucking the letter into her pocket, she quietly let herself out of the room. Striding to where she had witnessed Mr. Darcy’s valet enter his rooms, she knocked. Thornton answered.

“Mr. Darcy recommended a book I might enjoy reading to my sister. I failed to take note of the title or the author.” Elizabeth kept her voice level so the footman in the hallway would overhear. “If it would not be too much trouble, would you ask him the specifics,

please? I am on my way to the library now.”

Stepping back into the hallway to await the reply, Elizabeth was unsurprised when both Mr. Darcy and his valet joined her.

“Miss Elizabeth, my friend does not enjoy a good book as much as some do. Thus, the offerings in Netherfield Park’s library are sparse. Nevertheless, since I left my own book in the room earlier, I would be pleased to direct you to the exact shelf where the particular volume is located.”

“I thank you, sir,” Elizabeth replied.

Once they were in the room, Thornton moved to a corner reading nook, leaving them in privacy.

“You read my letter?”

“Not all,” she admitted. “Sir, I am sorry for your troubles.”

Elizabeth examined his face closely. Besides the pinched quality to his lips, Mr. Darcy was far too pale for a healthy man. The skin around his mouth and under his eyes was a greenish hue.

She knew that look. Not a se’nnight prior, Kitty and Lydia, in an attempt to appear far more mature than they actually were, over-indulged in their father’s brandy. The results had been disastrous for the girls. Elizabeth had held Lydia’s head over the chamber pot while Jane held Kitty’s.

“Tell me, I pray you,” Elizabeth asked.

The man ran his hand through his hair, causing it to stand on end.

“I will be blunt,” he promised. “Should I die without a male heir, Pemberley will pass to a distant cousin on the Darcy side. He is a gambler and a rake who has never concerned himself with my sister. He would destroy all that my ancestors have worked for—that *I* have worked for.”

“I see,” she murmured.

“You do?” he exclaimed. “For this I am grateful. I had planned to wait until I had reached thirty before searching for a wife, the future mistress of Pemberley. With this...this illness, I cannot wait.”

“I do understand.” Elizabeth tapped her fingers over her mouth. “You could not have chosen better, Mr. Darcy. Jane is everything kind and good. I do believe she would need someone to guide and support her after you are gone. And I suspect her heart has already formed an attachment to your friend. Those would be the only issues I could foresee that would prevent her accepting your offer.”

“Miss Bennet?” Darcy stepped back from her. “Why would I offer for her?”

His words sounded remarkably like an insult. *Did the man despise all the Bennets?* “Then, who?” Resting her fists on each hip, Elizabeth balked. “If you are wanting me to help you attach yourself to Miss Bingley, I do not think you needed to trouble me at all. She already

follows you around like a hungry puppy begging for a slight crumb from you, sir.”

“I would *never* offer for Miss Bingley. Ever!” He approached her with one giant step, leaving him far too close to her for comfort. “You, Miss Elizabeth, are the only female who has caught and captured my attention. You speak of Miss Bennet’s kindness. What of yours? Not one other lady I know would walk three miles to help a sister. You have a reputation, according to Thornton, for being kind to all. Would I have that sort of care for myself and Georgiana before and after I am gone, I would be at peace when I pass.”

His choice left her stunned. Her? He was offering for her, Lizzy Anne Bennet?

“Miss Elizabeth, before you reject me outright, I pray you allow me to tell you what else is in the letter.” At her nod, he continued. “Our marriage would not be in name only. My desperate need for an heir cannot be denied. Therefore, you would need to bear my attentions regularly until you were increasing. You would have the freedom of choosing where you would want to live after I am gone, as long as you raise my son to know his heritage. Your marriage settlement will be generous; I am not stingy. How you choose to use your funds would be your decision alone. Because of this, after raising our child to adulthood, you will have complete independence.” He hesitated. “Do you have any questions?”

Her mind was spinning. For a certainty, her heart was touched. His placing the interest of others ahead of himself was exemplary. Would that her own father cared about Longbourn to that extent.

But marriage? To him? They did not know each other well.

“Sir, this was not how I imagined things would be when I seriously considered marriage to a gentleman. Empathy for your situation begs me to help ease your way. Yet the lack of love and affection between us disturbs me greatly.”

Darcy visibly relaxed. “Your opinion is, in truth, refreshing. That you do not jump at the opportunity to become wealthy, to help your family in ways you never could without my offer, to gain freedom to choose, which is rare for a woman, tells me more than anything else that I have made the right decision.” He touched his hand to the back of hers before clasping it in his own. “Marry me, Miss Elizabeth.”

The storm in his light green eyes attested to his lack of confidence, as well as his troubled mind. When his other hand went to his chest, Elizabeth assumed he was preparing to make an additional promise. Once he started to cough and his stomach began to heave, she knew better.

Thornton rushed for a bowl at the same time Elizabeth helped him to a chair.

Within minutes, it was over. As she had done for Lydia, Elizabeth held Mr. Darcy's head, wiping his forehead and the back of his neck with the damp cloth the valet miraculously provided.

Pity blended with sympathy. To see a powerful man brought to his knees by circumstances not of his choosing was devastating to observe.

As she held him close, she knew what she had to do. She would marry Mr. Darcy.

Darcy cared not that he had humiliated himself. The only emotion identifiable after his tumult was relief. Relief to have the bitter taste of bile rinsed out of his mouth, the relief of being held in a tight embrace while at his weakest, and the relief of her agreement to his plan. He was overwhelmed.

“When do you want the wedding to take place?” she asked after Thornton had attended him.

“As soon as is possible.” Bracing himself on the arms of the chair, he stood, his knees shaking. Walking carefully toward the fire, he tossed his handkerchief into the flames. The last thing he saw before it shriveled and burned was red.

“I will go to Longbourn on the morrow to speak with your father. My solicitor in London has prepared my final Will and Testament along with the wedding articles. He has only to fill in your name for them to be complete. With your agreement, I will send a note via express so the documents can be delivered no later than tomorrow evening.”

“You are rather well-prepared, sir.”

“Yes, well.” He cleared his throat, raw from its recent abuse.

“Papa will want to know why you are in a hurry to marry me.”

“Although my preference is to have no one else know of my illness, I will tell Mr. Bennet the truth.”

Elizabeth nodded. When he had reseated himself, she went to the library shelves and randomly selected a book. “I believe your valet has tasks he needs to attend which will remove him from the room. It would not do for the two of us to be alone. I want no reproach to come upon either of us before we marry. With that said, I bid you goodnight.”

Darcy shifted his eyes so he would not watch her walk away from him.

His heart pained him. Her tenderness toward him, the way she had held him was...it almost robbed him of his breath. The last female to give him the same level of care was his mother before she became ill. For over sixteen years he had held himself aloof, allowing no one close.

In his marriage, he vowed to himself to do the same. For if he came to love his wife, their parting would be all that more devastating. No, he would not...he could not allow himself to feel anything more for Elizabeth than gratitude.

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Jane was sleeping soundly when Elizabeth let herself back into the room. Moving to the window, she pulled the heavy curtain back to survey the darkness.

From her earliest years, her father had taken Elizabeth outside to study the night sky. On that night, there was barely a hint of the waxing crescent in the far distant heavens. The next night would bring a new moon, a fresh beginning for a new orbital phase.

Tomorrow promised a new beginning for her as well. What had she been thinking? In truth, she had not been thinking at all. Feeling his agony in her own heart, she considered what the next few months would entail by accepting him.

With the assets available to the Darcys, Elizabeth's task to manage his investments would be monumental. As well, he had a sister who was completely unknown to her.

Elizabeth shook her head. Mr. Fitzwilliam Darcy was placing a tremendous amount of trust in her. Was she qualified to see things done as he would like? Not at all, she easily admitted to herself.

Could she be a good wife to a man she barely knew, one who viewed her as merely tolerable?

Realistically, marriages of this sort happened often, especially in his circles. However, Elizabeth wanted more than a cold business arrangement. Yet the fact that she would not be married for long urged her to use caution in matters of the heart. It would be better for her future if she viewed herself being united with Mr. Darcy as a short-term contractual agreement with long-term obligations outside of Mr. Darcy's person. She would marry him. But she would not allow herself to fall in love with him.

With that determination, Elizabeth was finally able to find rest. Despite the next day being Sunday, with Mr. Darcy traveling to Longbourn to fulfill his intended purpose, it promised to be unsettling to her father. He knew of Mr. Darcy's insult from the assembly. He also knew Elizabeth held the gentleman in disapprobation. Mr. Darcy would not be the only one who needed to provide a thorough explanation. Elizabeth would also be required to justify her reason for accepting the man. She would need to remain alert.

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Mr. Bingley handed Jane into Mr. Darcy's carriage. Their parting was touching. Easily seen was the couple's growing affection for each other.

Glancing at Elizabeth, Darcy noticed a wistful look upon her countenance. Surely she felt the same about their marriage, did she not? A love match was not to be for either of them.

When her eyes flicked up to his, she nodded once, evidence of her determination to at least see her elder sister happy.

Guilt tore at him at the cost to Elizabeth. He knew she had not yet reached her majority. The pressures and responsibilities he would be heaping upon her young shoulders had crushed strong men, causing them to abandon their estates and families to the so-called freedom of loose living. What would it do to her?

When Elizabeth's chin lifted as those very shoulders pressed back, Darcy knew that she, too, had considered all that would be asked of her. With that motion, she clearly signaled acceptance.

His sigh of relief as he assisted her into his carriage was louder than he had planned.

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The conversation with her father had gone as she expected. By the time Darcy and Elizabeth both explained their reasons for desiring to proceed with the marriage, Mr. Bennet had given his consent and blessing.

Her father moved a pile of books from one corner of the desk to the other, leaving one volume behind. It was a newer tome covered in unmarked brown leather. Picking the book up in his large hands, Thomas Bennet opened the journal, then laid it out on the desk before them. The pages were blank.

"I do believe this will be my wedding gift to you." Mr. Bennet busied himself with gathering writing materials to place in front of the groom-to-be. "I assume you have much information and instructions you will need to share with my Lizzy. Making a permanent record of these periods of education will give my daughter something to look back upon when you are no longer able to speak for yourself."

To Elizabeth, he said, "Of all my girls, you are the most qualified to take on this immense task. When Mr. Darcy tires of writing, it would benefit you should you take up wherever he leaves off. The questions you will ask now will be the same ones you will face in the future. With my responsibilities here in Hertfordshire, I will not be as available to you as either of us would prefer. Nevertheless, I promise to be a faithful correspondent. I would never want you to fail or for you to feel less than capable."

“Thank you, Papa.”

Darcy nodded his agreement. “Sir, might we make use of your study, in your presence, of course, to do exactly as you suggest? That you thought of this tells me that your insight will be greatly appreciated.” Darcy picked up the quill and dipped it into the ink bottle. “As I am to be your son for whatever length of time I have left, I would ask that you call me Darcy as my close friends do, or William as my sister refers to me.”

With everyone’s agreement of informal address, Darcy began to write.

In the lengthening silence, Elizabeth glanced at her father. He shrugged his shoulders as he examined the younger man. The minutes passed without Darcy hesitating once in his scribbles in the journal. Finally, he finished.

Placing the quill on the stand, he blotted the paper carefully. Sliding the book in front of Elizabeth, she studied him before her eyes dropped to the page.

Never before had she noticed how much could be revealed by a person’s iris. His dark orbs were shot through with pain, which was almost crowded out by flashes of turmoil. Elizabeth guessed that his emotional struggles were typically hidden by his erect posture. Unless a person looked carefully.

She sincerely doubted that he let many people close enough to see the real gentleman.

As her own eyes focused on the words, her hand went to her mouth.

16 October 1811

Longbourn, Hertfordshire

To my wife,

*Thank you for agreeing to marry me, to share my burdens, and to help ease my way to whatever life holds out for me.*

*I failed to see your value on the evening we met. For this, I offer my sincerest apology. Since then, I have come to appreciate the gentleness of your heart and the quickness of your wit. Of all the ladies of my acquaintance, I truly believe only you could step into the shoes of my mother and those who came before her as Pemberley’s mistress. From being its master, I can verify that the workload is tremendous. But the rewards are bounteous.*

*My sister will do well to follow your example.*

*I hear your father’s confidence in you as he speaks. I see your confidence in yourself. What I need you to know now, and in the future should you falter, is that my confidence in you is complete.*

*Your husband in sickness and in health,*

FD



Elizabeth had no words.

Her father chose that moment to attempt to lighten the mood. From where he sat, he could not possibly see the seriousness of what Darcy had written.

Mr. Bennet slapped his hands down on his desk and stood, "Well, Darcy, I will let you know from experience that your life will change from this moment on in ways you never imagined." Walking around the desk to stand next to the younger man, he put a hand on Darcy's shoulder. "Mrs. Bennet has never tolerated the smell of cigars. Despite my enjoyment of the habit, I have not smoked in over twenty years. I do not attempt to sneak out to the stables as she can smell the residue on my clothes and taste it on my breath. Elizabeth and Kitty have, neither of them, been able to tolerate cigar smoke. Therefore, if it is your habit, I suggest you stop it today."

Patting his hand on Darcy's fine coat, her father continued. "As well, my wife is desirous of my continued good health. Because of this, she limits the rich foods offered at our table to a minimum. I receive one cup of coffee each morning when I break my fast, and a glass of brandy with only a hint of liquid in it after the evening meal. I tell you this now because I suspect nothing will change with your presence in our home. As she does with all our guests, be they friend or family, my wife will see to your good health as well."

Darcy looked up at him, his expression grim. "I will take this information into consideration."

Mr. Bennet chuckled. "Oh, I would do much more than that, Son. You see, by your informing me of your need for an heir, there is a time when a woman is increasing that she holds all the power of decision in her hands. Early on when her stomach revolts with the changes to her...her body, you will likely very well find yourself adjusting your own preferences several times each day. What appeals to her on her plate one morning may turn her stomach inside out the next." He smirked. "I do not envy you my stubborn Lizzy during those months. Ah, but it is a blessed time you have to look forward to. Just watch yourself. Be willing to adapt and sacrifice. The joys of enduring those months are worth it all."

Elizabeth studied the man who would soon be her mate. With each word, the color appeared to drain from his face. Still, he said nothing.

Finally, her father stepped away from them with the intent to vacate the room.

"I shall leave you two some moments of privacy. I am sure you have much to discuss." He opened the door. Before her father stepped out and closed it behind him, he said, "I am off to torment Mrs. Bennet. See that you make progress in your understanding while I am gone."

At his parting comment, he closed the door.

Darcy roused himself to address her.

“Your father...” He halted, as if the whole of the conversation had hit him like a blow to the head, stealing his ability to think clearly. “I find him to be as insightful as his second daughter.”

Elizabeth grinned. Then she laughed.

Mr. Bennet had been correct.

Five days of dining at Mrs. Bennet's table, where the rich sauces were few, fresh water instead of wine was in abundance, and no smoking was allowed, had settled the pain in Darcy's insides until the disruptions were far fewer than before. Elizabeth and Darcy had sat at the opposite end of the table from her mother and two younger sisters, which made the company exceedingly pleasant. The settlement papers and Last Will and Testament had been signed and reviewed by all three. This increased Darcy's peace of mind.

On the sixth day after his proposal, Mr. Bennet accompanied Darcy and Elizabeth to London. Their purpose for making this journey was to introduce Darcy's bride-to-be to his mother's family, the Fitzwilliams.

Mr. Bennet's intention was to locate a former classmate from university with whom he had kept in contact over the years. As a third son, Mr. Ernest Cuthbert had studied medicine under some of the finest surgeons in Scotland. As a healthy man, Mr. Bennet had never before required his friend's services. However, he had promised Darcy that any inquiries made about the master of Pemberley's health would be discreet.

"You are not happy, William." Elizabeth squeezed his arm where her hand rested.

"I am...how did you know I was unhappy?" he puzzled. They had decided to take advantage of the lack of rainfall to walk from Darcy House to his aunt and uncle's London residence. "Have you already known me long enough to accurately predict my attitude, or was it merely a guess?"

She muffled her laughter with her gloved hand.

"You forget, sir, that my opportunities to observe you were mainly when you were in company with Miss Bingley." Elizabeth hopped over a puddle, pulling at his arm.

He placed his hand over hers, tightening his grip—for safely purposes only, he reasoned to himself.

"When in her presence, your constant expression was a frown. Your forehead furrowed, the back of your knuckles would turn white, and your lips were pressed together." Elizabeth smiled as she looked

up at the exact representation of his countenance when in Bingley's drawing room. "Yes, your expression mirrors that from the assembly and Netherfield Park, which begs the question: do I have reason to fear your mother's family?"

"No!" he replied immediately. "My uncle and aunt, Lord and Lady Matlock, are unpretentious. Their eldest son, Rupert, is a bit of a dandy. Their other son, Richard, is my closest friend. He is two years older than me, a colonel in the military who earned his rank, and is co-guardian to Georgiana. There is no one I trust more than I do him."

Elizabeth pondered the information. "Then why the frown? Do you fear *me* making a poor impression?"

"Absolutely not! Why would you ask such a thing?" Her statement was ludicrous.

"Then, pray tell me, what has you concerned at this moment in time?"

He stopped walking. Pulling the glove off his free hand, he turned her palm to undo the two buttons holding her glove tightly to her wrist. Placing the small lacy garment in his pocket with his own glove, he took her fingers in his.

The sensations pulsing up his arm were delightfully unexpected.

"Elizabeth, when my father was ill, physicians and surgeons came and went, each practicing what they felt was best for my father's improvement. Despite bleeding and purging him repeatedly, nothing worked. Each doctor on their own served to increase his misery, and mine." He inhaled deeply, pausing before releasing the air in his lungs. "I am not entirely comfortable with your father speaking to one of the many men who 'practice' medicine. I cannot take the chance of becoming too weak to sire an heir."

"I understand." She squeezed his fingers, her gaze never leaving his. "William, my father is a practical man who rarely allows an emotional attachment to influence his decisions. He will do everything within his power to see you hold his first grandchild in your arms. You see, both of my parents longed for at least one of their children to be a son. It was not to be. The potential to have a grandson, a boy to train and influence, is important to them."

"We may not have a son the first time, Elizabeth."

"Which is all the more reason to see to your health."

"And to marry quickly."

"Yes, William." Keeping her hand in his, Elizabeth turned to resume their walk. "Are you settled on Wednesday?"

"Yes." His confidence returned, he clarified, "I wrote to my aunt and uncle the day I received your father's consent. They are anticipating their introduction to you. Richard asked for leave to travel to Pemberley to retrieve Georgiana. All of them plan to be at

the wedding. Bingley has offered hospitality to them all. I asked Richard to stand up with me.”

“Jane will attend me,” Elizabeth said. “Papa said you both went to the rector for a common license. It appears all will be in order for a wedding in five days’ time.” She gulped.

It was the first evidence he had witnessed of her nerves. He felt like gulping, too.

This whole situation felt unreal. They had known each other less than a month. Yet in less than a se’nnight, they would be bound together in holy matrimony until death did them part. God willing, they would have a son before that happened.

In fewer than ten more steps, they were in front of Matlock House. He had no fear of introducing Elizabeth to them. At the slight tremble of her hand, Darcy determined to be her strength.

It did not matter what information for a diagnosis or possible treatment was recommended, he and Elizabeth would decide their course together.

At that lovely thought, he offered her a rare smile. Her response was joyous. Rarely had he seen such beauty in a lady. Her eyes sparkled. The rose color at the apples of her cheeks made him want to drop a kiss on the reddest spot. Controlling himself, right then and there he vowed to smile at her more often.

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“Why the rush?” Hugh Fitzwilliam, Darcy’s uncle, asked. “Does not Miss Bennet want all of the pomp associated with wedding a member of the *ton*?”

Elizabeth liked this man. His jolly countenance was the perfect foil for his direct speech. A person knew exactly where they stood with him the moment that he opened his mouth.

“I want nothing of the sort,” was Elizabeth’s quick reply. “My character is far more suited to country life, My Lord.”

“Darcy, what have you to say?” the earl insisted.

“Uncle Hugh, I plan to winter at Pemberley. To host my intended for that length of time without the support of her family, well, I would not want any speculation against the Darcy name or hers. Therefore, after consulting extensively with each other and Elizabeth’s father, the decision was made to marry now. Thus, we can spend the whole of the winter together.”

“I say, what a good plan,” the earl spouted. “Why, I recall waiting months to wed Helen only to continue our routine of socializing until we realized we were spending time with everyone else, not each other. I stopped that right away, I tell you.”

“Darcy, you are set in your plans?” his aunt asked. “Should you return to town after your wedding, I would host a ball to celebrate your union.”

Darcy glanced at Elizabeth, his brow raised.

Signaling to him that she desired to continue with what had already been arranged, he said, “I am terribly sorry, Aunt. Elizabeth and I long to spend our time together—alone with Georgiana. In that way, we can cement our relationship as a family before we need to return to town in the spring.”

Rupert smirked. His uncle nodded his agreement.

Rupert asked, grinning from ear to ear, “Have you told Aunt Catherine of your upcoming nuptials?”

Darcy replied, his tone firm, “I sent a letter to her as soon as I arrived at Darcy House inviting her and Anne to the wedding. Either she will, out of spite, not reply, or she will come barging in to try to stop the wedding. Either way, Elizabeth and I will marry on Wednesday with or without her.”

“I am certain you have much to do to prepare, Nephew.” His aunt set her teacup aside and stood. Darcy did as well. When she embraced him, she added, “My dear young man, I am pleased you have decided to wed. Unlike your cousins, who appear in no hurry to make me a grandmother, I will look forward to spending much time with the two of you, hopefully three or more of you, in the future.”

Elizabeth chuckled to herself as Darcy blushed. Inhaling quickly, she considered what that meant.

When she had first noticed Darcy at the assembly in Meryton, the lighting was muted. Elizabeth was unable to look at him closely. At Netherfield Park, she had noted the pallor of his skin but incorrectly assumed he was a man who spent little time out of doors. Now she knew her assumptions had been entirely wrong.

Had she become so used to him that she missed the change to the tone of his skin? Shame on her! What sort of wife would she be to a man of ill health if she failed to see what was in front of her face?

Watching him closely, when the blush faded, his cheeks had a slight pinkish hue—a healthy hue.

In studying him, she neglected to attend the conversation. It was only after they left when she realized they would be returning to dine with the family. Elizabeth’s father had been included in the invitation.

Hours later, after the elegant setting had been appreciated and the meal had been consumed, Elizabeth discovered once the gentlemen returned to the ladies that Darcy was again a pasty shade of beige.

The fish course had been a turbot served in a butter and white wine sauce, the potatoes had been swimming in cream, the roast beef was soaked in a rich red wine Bordelaise, and the only green

vegetable served had been sautéed in butter. The fragrance coming off the men after their time alone in the dining room was a blend of spirits and smoke. Each one of these elements increased Darcy's suffering.

By the time they returned to Darcy House, her betrothed had ripped off his cravat and unbuttoned the collar of his shirt. Abandoning Elizabeth and her father in the entrance hall, Darcy ran to his chambers. Elizabeth heard him retching on the way.

Without thought, she followed him, bursting into his chambers as Thornton shoved a chamber pot in front of him. Holding Darcy as she had done before, the valet prepared a damp cloth and filled a glass with water.

"Does it still burn?" Elizabeth placed her hand on his chest.

"Aye, it does." He leaned against her, his eyes closed, his breathing ragged.

Looking around for Thornton, Elizabeth was pleased to see her father standing inside the room.

"Can you tell us, Papa, if Dr. Cuthbert had any recommendations for us to aid William?"

Mr. Bennet cleared his throat, then said, "Ernest discussed a few different forms of disease which could cause these symptoms. One of his instructors from medical school spoke of *pépticus ulcus*, which is Latin for a sore in the digestion areas. If this is your situation, Darcy, there is little known that can be done. Ernest told me the best measure is to keep relaxed, to eat simply, to keep up your exercise, and to avoid brandy, whisky, or wine. In effect, to keep yourself from doing what you have just done." Mr. Bennet paused before continuing. "Or, it could be exactly as your father had, I am sorry to say."

The discouragement that hit Elizabeth at his words crushed Darcy. His head dropped into his hands.

"William," Elizabeth whispered for his ears alone. "Pray do not accept any more social engagements. Should your aunt and uncle want to see you, they can come to us where we can chart each crumb and drop served. Let us spend the next few days together where I can learn all I can about Darcy House and your London concerns. Then we can leave for Derbyshire immediately after we wed. Would this be agreeable?"

"Yes, Elizabeth." Darcy sat up, looking directly at her. "I am ready to go home."

**F**ive days later, the couple married.

Mrs. Bennet, upon hearing she would have an earl, a countess, and a viscount in her home, had outdone herself for the wedding breakfast. Suspecting the food would be too much for his stomach to bear, Elizabeth had ordered a basket prepared by Longbourn's cook with simpler fare.

Georgiana had elected to accept the invitation extended to her by the Fitzwilliams. This would leave Darcy traveling alone with his wife. Additionally, they would winter together, just the two of them. In truth, he did not mind at all.

Over the past fortnight since their engagement, Elizabeth had proven to be exactly the lady he needed to help him through his trials. The journal her father had gifted them was almost halfway filled with meticulously written details. She now knew more about him than any other human, including Richard. After their wedding night, she would know him better than Thornton.

During their brief time together, their physical contact had been a touch of her hand on his arm, the embrace as she held him during his sickness, and the one time he had held her hand. After the ceremony ended, it was time to kiss his bride.

He was not comfortable with public displays of affection. Never would he have considered doing the like himself. Yet when the opportunity presented itself, Darcy viewed the twinkle in her eyes, the touch of her fingers brushing his sleeve, and the lifting of her chin as an invitation. Lowering his head, his lips brushed hers, the contact little more than a whisper of a promise. When he raised his head, her smile had him undone. With no consideration for those in the chapel who witnessed the marriage, he gently pulled her toward him, this time deepening the kiss until he was aware of only her.

She was...she was in every way amazing.

He was rudely brought back to the present when his cousin clapped him on the shoulder. "Well done, Darcy."

It was the first time he blushed that day. The second time happened in the carriage.

Darcy was amazed at Elizabeth's eagerness to engage him in



conversation on a variety of subjects. An example occurred when they were not even one mile from her family's estate.

"William, would you share with me your earliest memories?"

"Why do you ask?" He could not imagine how that unimportant reflection could be important to her as mistress of their homes or once she was alone.

"My husband, I hope, as do you, to be with child soon. When he or she asks about you, I want to share intimate details that would mean little to those outside of our family. But they would be important to us. Therefore, it stands to reason that I *want* to know all that I can about you. As well, I have come to respect you very much."

"You seem surprised," he teased.

"Hah! Do not begin to tell me that your opinion of me has not also changed for I simply would not believe you." Elizabeth smiled. "No, in all seriousness, when you first offered marriage to me, if I thought of you at all, it was rather poorly. One accomplishment from spending so much of our days together has been understanding why you respond as you do."

"What do you mean?" His question was sincere. She was correct. His opinion of her had changed—for the better, despite already being good from the start.

Her index finger rested on her chin as she considered how best to reply. "Allow me to provide you with an example." Smoothing a wrinkle from her skirt, she began, "On the day your Aunt Helen visited me at Darcy House, she told me how the ladies of society and their mothers hunted you down like prey in an effort to entangle you into marriage. First and foremost amongst those grasping females, she said, was your aunt Catherine and cousin Anne. Then she explained how you refused to dance and stood aloof out of self-protection. When I compared this to your response at the Meryton assembly when Mr. Bingley attempted to coerce you to dance with young ladies you barely knew, I understood that your character was not shy or timid. You were weary of the chase, were you not?"

"Yes," Darcy replied, amazed at her thought process. "What else?"

"Another example?" She waited for his nod, then added, "Very well. Another example is the difference, from the beginning, in the way you acted when around Miss Bingley and the way you spoke with me."

"You noticed a difference?" For some reason, that embarrassed Darcy. Why that was so he had not a clue. Wait! No, that was an untruth. He knew why her comment caught him off guard. He had no respect for Miss Caroline Bingley, nor had he ever felt a physical attraction to her. Quite unlike how he felt when around Elizabeth.

For he had to admit that once he truly looked at Elizabeth and

watched her behavior with others, he felt a pull toward her that was more than merely animalistic. She intrigued him. Each minute with her stirred him body and soul. In fact, his anticipation of their wedding night, along with the nights to come, burned inside of him.

*Does she feel the same?*

Shaking off the thought and the heat that was slowly rising under his collar, Darcy finally gave her the information she sought.

"My earliest memory was of telling my father that when I grew up, I wanted to marry my mother."

He delighted as her mouth dropped open, her shoulders began to shake, and her laughter filled the carriage.

"You did not!" Elizabeth insisted.

"I most certainly did." Darcy chuckled. "At the ripe age of five years old, I considered myself a connoisseur of fine horseflesh, enchanting stories, apple tarts, and women." Darcy snorted at her smirk. Then he asked, "What about you? What is your earliest memory?"

"Ah, you turn the tables upon me. Well, I do not fear to tell you my first memory because I was safely ensconced in my father's study. He was reading aloud Jonathan Swift's *Travels into Several Remote Nations of the World. In Four Parts. By Lemuel Gulliver, First a Surgeon, and then a Captain of Several Ships*. As I recall, I could not decide if I wanted to be Gulliver or a Lilliputian. In the way of young children, I decided the best thing to do was to be every character in the book. I would dream about sailing to distant lands to meet all sorts of people."

"I was exactly the same," Darcy admitted. "Even during my waking hours, I yearned to fight pirates, meet cannibals, and traverse the seas like Robinson Crusoe. I was also influenced by *Gulliver's Travels*. My father did the same as yours; he read those books to me several times. It was not until years later that I realized he enjoyed them as much as I. Was he reading them for me? Or for him?"

Merriment can be a wonderful thing when shared between close friends. As his wife continued to find amusement in his memory, Darcy found himself laughing along with her. The next several hours passed quickly as they shared joys and sorrows, pleasures and pain. By the time they reached their final stop for the night, they were relaxed in each other's company far more than they had ever been before.

Once they had removed the dust of the road and quenched their hunger and thirst, it seemed natural to arrange to meet her in her chambers as soon as she was readied for bed.

*Good Lord!* He was eager. Was she?

As he waited to knock on her door, he considered his vow not to fall in love with her. He needed to exercise caution. The respect she

had earned from him the past fortnight was genuine. Darcy knew how easily deep regard could transform into affection. From there, it was a short path to the sort of love he had always dreamed of having. However, with his circumstances, he needed to safeguard his heart or the pain of leaving her would be more than he could bear.

An hour later, as they had arranged, he entered her chamber. The bedclothes had been turned down in readiness for them. Elizabeth's robe and gown were thick cotton, which was wise in the early November chill. Her feet were bare.

Determined that their joining would be solely a physical reaction to the need for an heir, Darcy approached her with only the mechanics of the act in mind.

One kiss was all it took for his inhibitions to fly out the window. By the next morning, he knew he was in deep trouble. All their exchanged ideas, dreams, and concerns had culminated in a relationship bound together as tightly as possible.

Elizabeth had claimed his mind soon after he met her. She had claimed his body the night before. Sometime during the night, she captured his heart. He had done the unthinkable—he had fallen in love with his wife.

Elizabeth's mother had told her what to expect on her wedding night. Could a woman have been more wrong? Nothing could have prepared Elizabeth for the onslaught of emotions that overwhelmed her.

As dawn ascended the next morning, Elizabeth observed her husband in the muted light glowing through the thin curtain of the east-facing window. He was remarkably handsome with dark hair and green eyes, long eyelashes, and well-shaped brows. His nose was the perfect size for his face. His chin was squared at the bottom.

Should they have a son resulting from their activities, she hoped he looked exactly like his father. She wanted him to be a man of duty and honor just like Darcy. Mostly, Elizabeth yearned to have a son who was attentive to others—just like...

What was happening? Where was the ire that he had raised in her at the Meryton assembly? Where was her anger as Darcy had overlooked each of her neighbors and friends as being too far below him in rank?

*You silly goose!* Elizabeth scoffed at her foolishness. Had not he revealed his true self to her repeatedly since the evening she met him in the library when she first learned of his illness? Of course, he had. Her clinging to her stubborn first opinion was ridiculous. And it was not fair to either of them.

Could she love him? Admitting the truth to herself, she knew the possibility of completely losing her heart to him was looming. Her reasoning for protecting that vital organ was sound. She would not fall in love with her husband. She refused to fall in love with him. Perhaps if she chanted that to herself enough, she might even come to believe it was true.

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Four days later, they arrived at Pemberley.

His wife's response when she first spotted Pemberley was one that he would never forget. Her mouth gaped as her lovely head moved from side to side.

"All of this..." she muttered.

"Yes, my dear, of all of this you are mistress." Darcy could not contain his smile when she turned her face, full of wonder, toward him. "Have no fear, Elizabeth. You will have me to aid you for as long as I am able. Mrs. Reynolds has served Pemberley for almost a quarter century. My steward is a trustworthy man. Additionally, I spoke with Richard at length of my...my circumstance. Should I not survive...ah, should I not survive long, he agreed to sell his commission and move to Derbyshire. I recommended he live in the Dower House as long as he is needed."

"How kind of him," Elizabeth murmured disconsolately.

He sensed her discomfort when her gaze dropped to the hands twisting on her lap.

"Yes, he is a good and reliable man." Darcy placed his finger under her chin. "Elizabeth, pray look at me."

He completely understood her hesitation. The necessary conversation needed done despite the fact that they were still sitting inside his carriage about a mile from the main house. That knowledge did nothing to ease either of their discomfort.

"My wife, I will not lie to you, nor will I hide anything from you." He sighed when her gaze met his. He was startled to note the tears pooling at the corners of her eyes. Grabbing his handkerchief from his pocket, he tucked it between her fingers. "I have told Richard all with absolute confidence in his ability to keep the information to himself. I also suggested... Oh, Lord. This is much harder than I had thought." He gulped before continuing. "I suggested the two of you marry after I am gone. Richard would be a good husband and father. I...I... Elizabeth, I needed to know you would not be alone once I am gone. I pray you forgive me."

She tugged and ripped at the ribbons holding her bonnet, then flung it across the carriage. Tucking her face into the side of his neck, her hands grabbed at his heavy coat.

"I am sorry, Elizabeth," he murmured into her hair. "This is not the homecoming I planned." His arms encircled her, pulling her closer. "I am not the sort of man who can leave things to happenstance if I have the means to offer my protection. I desperately want you to be happy here, my bride. I cannot tolerate the idea of spending what little time we have worrying about what will become of you. I cannot. I need to know you will be cared for as someone's highest priority."

"William," she whispered through her tears, "where you are pragmatic, I brim with optimism. Since we have been cautious about what you have eaten, you have improved in your health, have you not?" Elizabeth pulled back far enough that her face was inches from his. "You may plan for the future as you will, but I refuse to accept

that you will not be my husband in a year's time, or two or three or many more years' time. I refuse!"

The fierceness of her expression warmed his heart. She was correct. Other than after their meal with the Fitzwilliams, he had not coughed or cast up blood since leaving Netherfield Park. The painful burning in his chest was less frequent, and he was able to lay prone in bed without feeling as if his insides were a volcano about to erupt.

Nevertheless, at first, his father had periods of days where he felt his normal self. This lasted several months. George Darcy's downturn came swiftly without ceasing. Twelve months later, he was gone.

Crushing Elizabeth to him, he kissed her as if his life depended on her caress. She returned his embrace with fervor.

Thus, it was a rumpled couple who entered his ancestral home.

Darcy enjoyed seeing her gaze rove over the furnishings and the decor. When his wife met with his housekeeper to review the household accounts and menus, she had returned to him with copious notes and scribbles.

Elizabeth was as diligent in gaining the housekeeper's assistance as she had been at Darcy House. By the time they welcomed the first snow of the season, her journal pages were almost full. As the year 1811 came to a close, the book had been placed on the library shelf that held Lady Anne Darcy's journals. Darcy could not believe the joy he felt at seeing his wife's work next to his mother's.

This was not his only joy.

Elizabeth's oversight of his meals and drink was as strict as Richard was with his regiment. She permitted no deviation from what Darcy had tolerated well at Longbourn. Initially, Cook balked at losing control of his kitchen. When Elizabeth explained that the funds saved would be designated for having expensive out-of-season fruit shipped from the warmer southern climes, Cook relented.

Almost two months after their arrival, a crate of mushy, bruised bananas that had originated somewhere in the Caribbean arrived at Pemberley. Darcy favored the taste when they were added to the gruel that Elizabeth determined he needed each morning. When Cook inserted the fruit into the breads he served with tea, Darcy noticed a distinct reduction in the simmering fire that still lingered in his chest. When the bananas were gone, he learned that his wife had Cook order more.

His greatest joy was the time they spent alone in her chamber. It was their opportunity to express their tender feelings, then discuss their day's activities, their plans for the next day, and their concerns. Each time Elizabeth attempted to insert her hopes and dreams for the future, Darcy asked her not to allow the conversation to go in that direction. What was a positive for her was a source of agony for him.

It was not that she was cruel—not at all. The difference in her nature and his was the only cause of strife between themselves.

“My husband, we were wed three months ago. I do not know if you are aware, but I have not had to deny you since our second week of marriage.” Her smile was radiant.

Hope built in his chest until it overflowed. “Are you saying...do you mean...are you...are we...?”

She giggled, then snuggled closer. “I have not yet felt the quickening. It is too early. Yet it is highly irregular for me to miss my courses. They have always been as constant as clockwork. Therefore, I can only conclude that our nocturnal activities have borne fruit. In about seven months, if all goes well, you will become a father.”

He could not breathe. The air went right out of him. His chest pounded so loudly that he could not hear his wife’s voice. A father! He was going to be a father? How could that...? Oh, he knew exactly *how* it could happen. But that it did already... *Good heavens!* He was going to be a father.

Grinning from ear to ear, he kissed his wife thoroughly. Then he pulled back. Was it dangerous for her to participate in...? Well, he needed to speak with someone—anyone.

“Elizabeth, you need to take care,” he observed. “There will be no more walking in the snow and ice. You will remain inside Pemberley until the weather turns. You will stop sneaking biscuits from Cook when you think I am not aware. And you will rest more during the day.”

“And you will stop worrying, William,” she insisted. “I am well.”

Hugging her to him, he pleaded, “Elizabeth, you cannot know how important you are to me—you and our child. Your task is to stay healthy. My task is to protect you. Allow me to do this, I beg you.”

Her kiss was sweetness itself.

When morning arrived, along with her maid carrying a breakfast tray, Elizabeth took one whiff of the eggs on the plate and bolted for her dressing room. Moments later, it was Darcy holding her head and wiping her brow and the back of her neck with a cool, damp cloth.

Every day for the next six weeks, her stomach felt worse as his improved with each serving of bland food. When Elizabeth felt the quickening, it had been almost four months since Darcy had coughed up blood. The couple celebrated this milestone with him reading *Robinson Crusoe* aloud to her as she snuggled next to him in front of a roaring fire in the library.

Could either of them be more content? In Darcy’s mind, it simply was not possible.

**I**t was possible.

Spring came early to Derbyshire, melting the snow so the treasures buried underneath presented themselves in glorious display. By the middle of March, the garden paths were lined with early purple flowers, daffodils, and crocuses. White wood anemones carpeted the areas underneath the surrounding forests.

Each day that the weather held, Darcy and Elizabeth bundled up against the chill of the morning to stroll the fields surrounding the house. When storms prevailed, they walked around the perimeter of the ballroom until Elizabeth tired.

As they ambled along, the couple talked.

“Do you know, dear Elizabeth,” Darcy teased, “I cannot recall ever being this verbose. I believe my relatives will wonder what you have done to me to make this change.”

She chuckled. “My husband, your willingness to listen as I read to you my letters from Longbourn, especially from my younger sisters, has convinced me that you are the sovereign of patience. Your comments about the contents are never mean-spirited or condescending. I appreciate your foresight in doing all that you can to please me more than you can know.”

He put the back of his hand against his forehead, the picture of long-suffering. “Have you not learned yet that I would do anything for you? If it pleases you to read of the silliness of Kitty and Lydia, then it pleases me to hear it.” He smirked. “I will confess that I do prefer the letters we receive from your father and Jane. I also enjoy hearing the news of Kent from your good friend Charlotte. Her opinions and insights of my aunt and cousin at Rosings appear to be far more accurate than what I hear from Lady Catherine or Anne.”

Elizabeth shook her head. “I still cannot believe Charlotte married Father’s cousin, Mr. Collins. From what Papa says, he is a ridiculous man with an inflated opinion of his opinions, and those of your aunt.”

Helping her around a hedge whose growth spurt had left a few leaves further into the path than the other plants, Darcy commented, “Dearest, consider the prospects of Mrs. Collins. One day in the distant future, she will be the mistress of Longbourn, an estate she can pass



down to her children. With the entail broken upon your father's eventual death, either a son or a daughter can inherit. Without her marriage to Mr. Collins, where would she be?"

"I do see your point, William," Elizabeth agreed, her lips lifting at the corners. "I have kept this a secret all of these months but will tell you now that Charlotte was as much in shock about our marriage as I was with hers."

"Was she, then?" Darcy nodded. "I suspected as much when it was a long time after our marriage until we received word from her. Mr. Collins wrote me almost immediately to welcome himself into the exalted Darcy family."

"I do recall the sudden burst of laughter—or was it derision?—that came from your study almost as soon as you broke the seal." Patting his arm, Elizabeth stopped walking. "There are heavy, grey clouds rushing in upon us. Perhaps it is time to turn back?"

His distraction with his wife and the topic they considered caused him to ignore what was now very obvious to them both. They were in for a hard rain. Their brisk pace almost kept them from getting wet. They were within sight of the side door when the first drops started to fall. Scooping his wife into his arms, he began to run.

"Fitzwilliam Darcy!" she squealed, then laughed. Throwing her head back, both hands wrapped around his neck, she opened her mouth to catch a drop. When one missed and landed on the tip of her nose instead, he joined in her mirth.

Mrs. Reynolds and one of the footmen waited to take their outer garments. When the heavy pile was in her arms, the housekeeper said, "An express arrived from Rosings Park in Kent, sir. The rider is in the kitchen awaiting your reply."

Darcy sighed. "Very well."

He carried his wife to his study. He wanted Elizabeth with him when he read the letter, as whatever the missive contained would affect her as much as him.

Settling her on the sofa, he wrapped a warm blanket over her legs. Sitting close alongside her, he broke the seal.

*The Rt. Honorable Lady Catherine de Bourgh*

*Rosings Park, Kent*

*Darcy,*

*You can be at no loss, Nephew, to understand the reason for my letter. Your own heart, your own conscience, must tell you why I have written.*

*A report of a most scandalous nature has been given me by my parson, Mr. Collins. He shared that Mrs. Collins received information that your wife is already increasing. What is the meaning of this? Are you not aware that persons of our exalted rank do not rush to fill their nurseries? I told you when you wed that upstart from Hertfordshire that she would be the*

*undoing of you. This news proves me correct, as always. I ask you now, what do you intend to do about this travesty? The very name of Fitzwilliam is involved so do something, I command you!*

*I will expect you for your annual spring visit in two weeks. Mr. Collins has prepared a lengthy sermon where he uses the death of our Lord and Savior as an example to nephews who should sacrifice and obey their elders. I have no doubt you will benefit from his discourse.*

*Your closest living relative,*

*Lady Catherine*

Elizabeth's chin had dropped almost to her chest. "Is she truly as arrogant as she writes?"

"More so, I believe." Darcy folded the parchment, then placed it on the table. Elizabeth pushed it away from them to the far edge of the tabletop, where it teetered but did not fall.

She harrumphed. "I cannot accept that a woman with claims of the highest intelligence would not realize that it is the poor who attempt to delay filling their nurseries. Those of her station yearn for heirs, do they not?"

"You are correct, my wife. My aunt, as is usual, is wrong."

They both grinned.

"If we ignore the portion about our nursery, this leaves the matter of you traveling all the way to Kent. Does this fit in your plans?" Elizabeth asked.

"I do not know that I should go this year. We travel next week to Longbourn for the wedding of Bingley and Jane. This leaves us four hours from London, and another four hours to my aunt's estate. I prefer to have your company for the whole of the journey, but it cannot possibly be good for you and our babe. Perhaps the better plan would be for you to remain with your family at Longbourn while I travel to London to see Georgiana. Richard usually accompanies me to Kent. We could take care of the annual review of the estate and be back to Hertfordshire within two weeks. Would this be a tolerable solution for you?"

Elizabeth considered his idea carefully. "To be honest, with Jane and Mr. Bingley leaving immediately for their wedding trip, I would prefer not to spend too much time with my family. After an initial greeting and a short visit, Papa will withdraw to his study for peace. Mama will want to drag her wealthy daughter around the neighborhood. Mary would ignore me as she pursues her own interests, and Kitty and Lydia would torment me with their absurdities. Although I do not care to journey to Kent, I would enjoy spending time at Darcy House with your sister. Her letters have been delightful."

"A brilliant plan," Darcy agreed. "I will send a note to the

Fitzwilliams so Georgiana can be returned to Darcy House then alert the staff to expect you both. I will also write to Richard to ask him for his company.”

“What of the express writer?”

He grumbled, “I will reply to Aunt Catherine. To Kent I will go.”

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Jane Bennet was a lovely bride. However, it was not her sister who caught and held Elizabeth’s attention. Bingley had asked Darcy to stand up with him. While the groom stared at his bride-to-be, Elizabeth stared at the best man.

When the rector asked the couple to repeat their vows, Elizabeth kept a slight smile on her face as she said the words silently to herself.

“Wilt thou have this Woman to thy wedded Wife, to live together after God's ordinance in the holy estate of Matrimony? Wilt thou love her, comfort her, honour, and keep her in sickness and in health; and, forsaking all other, keep thee only unto her, so long as ye both shall live?”

Her gaze met her husband’s. As Bingley replied “yes,” Darcy tipped his head toward his wife.

“Wilt thou have this Man to thy wedded Husband, to live together after God's ordinance in the holy estate of Matrimony? Wilt thou obey him, and serve him, love, honour, and keep him in sickness and in health; and, forsaking all other, keep thee only unto him, so long as ye both shall live?”

When Elizabeth mouthed the word “yes,” Darcy smiled. The clergyman continued the ceremony. Elizabeth was so lost in thought that she completely missed the rest of the service.

For a certainty, she had striven to obey her husband, grateful that he made the process palatable to her. She yearned to serve William, to make his life as comfortable as possible. Elizabeth knew in her heart that he did the same for her. She honored him, and she kept him during the sickness that plagued him early in their marriage. There was no difficulty in forsaking all others, as what other man could possibly compare to Fitzwilliam Darcy? None!

But did she love him? Before they wed, she had vowed to protect her heart so she would not suffer loss when he was no longer living. Had she been successful?

Elizabeth gasped. The answer was as clear as the chapel bells ringing. No, she had not been successful at all. For better or for worse, she was very much in love with her husband.

As the newlyweds walked down the aisle, Darcy approached her, holding out his hand for her to take.

She looked up at the warmth of his emerald eyes and saw exactly what she hoped to see. Pure, unadulterated love.

Her fingers, of their own accord, joined with his. When they walked out of the chapel together, it felt like a new beginning for her.

*He cannot die! Dear God, please let him live.*

Georgiana Darcy was exactly as Elizabeth had expected: delightful.

“Come, Elizabeth.” Georgiana pulled her sister-in-law away from the bookshelves in Darcy House’s library. “You promised me that you would visit the shops. Do not go back on your word.”

“But Georgiana,” Elizabeth pretended to whine, “we were at Bond Street yesterday and the day before. How many ribbons and pairs of gloves does a girl need?”

The stunned look on Georgiana’s face made her chuckle.

“Elizabeth Darcy, you must see more of London than Hyde Park. I am fatigued from the thought of one more stroll. Have you not made me walk more in the three days you have been here than I have in my whole lifetime?” Georgiana’s eyes twinkled, the result of her blatant exaggeration. “Come! I should have purchased that lovely yellow ribbon yesterday. I believe that my desire was piqued because you said the length of satin reminded you of a summer’s day. I simply must have it for my newest gown.”

Laughing at the girl, Elizabeth accepted her coat and bonnet from her maid.

“I am so happy you married William!” Georgiana nearly bounced as she spoke. “I love more than anything how easy he is in your presence, Elizabeth. To see him relaxed and smiling often is more than I ever hoped when he told me he would marry. And the best part is that you are equally as happy. I have decided I want no less for myself when I wed, which I will never do if I do not have that yellow ribbon for my gown, will I?”

“You have become very pert, Miss Darcy,” Elizabeth teased.

The joy of spending time with her newest sister had been dampened by Darcy’s leaving for Kent that morning. Colonel Fitzwilliam had arrived at Darcy House ready to go so, according to him, he could hurry up and return. Darcy expressed his agreement with his cousin’s expression.

Throughout the meal the evening prior to their departure, the men offered embellished accounts of their aunt’s insane comments on everything from raising chickens to the need for government tax reform. Nothing that Lady Catherine had said made sense to Elizabeth.

Still, she was drawn into the conversation in seeing how relaxed her husband was with his family. Surely Lady Catherine was not *that* bad, was she?

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"I say, what a lovely wife you chose, Darcy. She is quite bright and cheerful, a good match for Georgie," the colonel said almost before the door to the carriage closed.

Darcy smiled, in full agreement with his cousin.

"I will confess, Richard, that I will not say or hear a word against Elizabeth." Darcy tapped on the roof to signal that they were ready to proceed.

"Then you should warn our aunt of your stand before we are many minutes into our stay at Rosings. She remains bitter that you did not marry Anne. Even more, she is angered that you refused to consult her before you made a match in the first place."

Nodding, Darcy told his cousin, "I cannot help but think that Elizabeth saved my life. Before I offered for her, which had to be the worst proposal in the history of mankind, I had to set aside the feelings of panic and desperation that threatened to consume me. Once I saw her clearly, I inherently knew she was for me. I tease you not, Richard, my wife has brought me more joy than I dreamed possible. She is a constant source of amazement to me."

"You love her."

"I do," Darcy could state without hesitation. "Her value is so much more than a mere companion or vessel for my child. She is fully involved in seeing to my health and happiness. Toward her, I am the same."

When Richard failed to respond, Darcy looked at him closely.

"Is something wrong, Cousin?"

Richard cleared his throat. "My health and welfare are good." He paused. Finally, inhaling deeply, he began, "Darce, I recall the night you told me of your struggles. Before you asked me to marry Elizabeth as soon after her widowhood as was proper, you clearly stated your intent not to fall in love with her. You told me that to do so would cause you more pain than you felt you could handle. Do you recall?"

"Yes, I do." Swallowing the words threatening to bubble over, he merely stated, "I was a fool."

"Yes, well..." Richard focused his gaze out the window for a bit. Eventually, when he apparently had his thoughts together, he continued. "I am pleased to hear your affections are fully engaged with your wife for two reasons. The first, my friend, is that of any man I know, you deserve to be happy. This joy you are feeling will make

your time left on earth, whether it is months or decades, easier for me to observe.”

“So, my life is an act on the stage to you?” Darcy smirked.

“That was not my meaning at all.” Richard chuckled. “However, you must admit that your performance has been rather entertaining. For years I watched you fight off the attentions of parasitic leeches with a skill few men possess. Either that or you ran at the first hint of compromise, outdistancing your predators easily. It has been very much like some of the more dramatic plays found at Drury Lane.”

Darcy shook his head at his cousin despite recognizing the grain of truth in his analogy.

“While I thank you that you recognize the pleasure I have in my marriage, you mentioned two reasons you are elated for me.”

Richard squirmed in his seat. “Yes, well, as to that, I have met someone.”

Darcy could not restrain his eyebrows from lifting almost to his hairline. His chin dropped. “What? When? Who?” he demanded. He began to get an unsettling feeling in his stomach when his cousin failed to answer immediately. Instead, Richard rubbed his hand over his mouth and stared out the window again.

“Do you believe I would not approve?” Darcy asked, then waited.

Without looking back at him, Richard replied, “She is the middle child of an impoverished country gentleman whose brother serves in my regiment. They have no money. Their estate is almost in ruin because of the neglect of the father. Susan, Miss Susan Carter, has worked her hands to the bone in an attempt to restore some sort of honor to their household.”

“Gambling?” Darcy asked.

“That and a series of poor investment decisions.”

“I see. How many children are there in all?”

“The eldest son is as much of a wastrel as his father. Malcolm is the next in line. He is a good sort and a capable officer who serves under me. The rest are three girls, of whom Miss Susan is the eldest. Their mother died a decade past.”

“Are any of the other daughters married?”

“None.”

Darcy pondered the information thoroughly. Immediately, he saw Richard’s concerns.

“Will you offer for her?” Darcy asked.

“I would have the care of all of them except Malcolm on my military pay, which is fine for an unattached officer or a family used to poverty. The Carters’ downfall is recent. They have been used to a means of living far beyond my ability to provide.” Richard rubbed the palms of his hands on his trousers. “To hear of your happiness, to

witness firsthand the joy of your marriage, suddenly becomes bitter medicine to me. I want to have what you have, Darcy, not who you have.” Richard looked to his boots. “There, you have it all, Cousin. Those are the two reasons I must take back my word that I would marry Elizabeth should there be a need.”

Now it was Darcy who could not look at his cousin. At the time he had made the request of Richard, his heart was not attached to Elizabeth. Nevertheless, the whole conversation reminded him of how much had changed during the almost five months since his offer to her.

Where once the idea of Elizabeth and Richard having a life together brought him a measure of relief, now it made his stomach churn. There was nothing for it but for he and Richard to discover an equitable solution so his cousin could find the same happiness as he had.

“Would you accept the gift and care of one of my estates?” Darcy inquired, thinking it might be the perfect solution.

“In truth, I am unsurprised at your generous offer.” Richard turned away from the window to face him. “What you also need to know is that while this is the first time in my life that I have seriously considered marriage, I am not yet prepared to make her an offer. My reasons are not solely economical. You see, I am a selfish enough creature to desire my mate to have me as her top priority. There is a hesitancy I feel when I am with her. Thus, I must ask you, how did you know Elizabeth was the right woman for you? How were you certain she would be an asset and not a liability?”

“A good question, Rich.” Darcy pondered how best to reply. Finally, knowing he could bare his soul to his cousin without fear, he told the events as they happened. “I was considering Elizabeth as a potential marriage partner but had not yet made up my mind. A few of the things about her that had impressed me sound rather similar to your Miss Susan. Elizabeth’s care for her family was unparalleled to anyone I have ever known. When Bingley’s sister spoke condescendingly to her, Elizabeth refused to reply in kind. Her conversation was exceedingly pleasant, and she comported herself as the lady she is—quite unlike Caroline Bingley, who attempts to act the lady she wants to be.”

“Yes, I could see the appeal of the one and not the other.” Richard had his finger and thumb on his chin, nodding.

“What convinced me that I had made the right choice was Sir Martin Frobisher.”

“What? How could someone long dead have helped you choose a wife?”

Darcy related to his cousin the conversation from the drawing



room. "I knew right then that Elizabeth Bennet would be a wonderful mother to any child we had. Rather than enforce harsh discipline or ignore the child altogether like many in our circles do, Elizabeth would endeavor to train, to reason with, rather than to scold. There would not be much that would get by her; her mind is so swift. She would not be mean, to me or anyone else."

"Therefore, you proposed, and she accepted," Richard guessed.

"Well...not exactly." Darcy grinned. "I vomited my dinner and a considerable amount of blood in her presence. Some of the particles landed on her skirt. With no complaints, Elizabeth held my head and wiped my brow. In the aftermath, without thought, most likely due to my weakness, I leaned my temple against her chest. There, she stroked my hair the same as she would do to anyone for whom she felt tender compassion. For a certainty, I had done nothing to earn her care. In fact, I had been unusually cruel to her the night we met. She forgave me, Richard. With that one act, her putting me ahead of the bounds of propriety, which are as important to her as they are to me, I knew in my heart that I would never find a finer woman."

"So, casting up your accounts was what worked? In all my concerns of proper courting, I never gave it a thought." The laughter coming from Richard sprang from deep inside him. Suddenly, he sobered. "I fully suspect that if I did the same to Miss Susan, she would attend me. But she would complain."

"As would most females, I believe." Darcy wondered about this young lady who held Richard's interest.

"Darce, I thank you for your openness. Despite the circumstances being entirely different, the reasoning behind the decision is the same. You needed someone whom you could trust to care for the life you would leave behind in the same manner you would if you were here. Someone you knew with confidence would react well under difficulty. I need someone who would do exactly the same should I be sent back to the continent for a year or more. Therefore, it seems the issue comes down to trust. You trusted Elizabeth with all that you have and are. Could I do the same with Miss Susan?" He considered the matter. "At this time, I do not know for certain."

"Then pray do not be in a hurry to make your offer, Rich. Come to know how she responds when under adversity, as well as under the good." Darcy added, "Whatever choice you make, remember it is for your lifetime."

Richard nodded. "I am grateful your health is vastly improved from when you were in town in the autumn. I hope you continue on this path so we can have a long life together as a family. Whether Miss Susan Carter will be a part of that family, I do not know. However, know this: I will spend the time I need to find out."

“Very good.”

Gazing outside the window, the carriage was making the final turn before they approached Rosings Park. Feeling a tenseness enter his gut, Darcy breathed in and out slowly to calm himself. Elizabeth had given him a list of instructions to provide Rosings’ cook, along with directions to remove himself from Kent if the stress of being around his aunt and cousin became too much.

He recognized his wife’s wisdom as they drew closer and the tightness intensified.

“Richard, I am inclined to bury myself in the estate’s ledgers should you see to the grounds on this trip. The sooner we return to town the better, I believe.”

“I am in full agreement with you there. I need to return to my troops and a possible romance. You want to be back in London to see Elizabeth.”

---

Elizabeth was readying for bed later that evening when someone pounded on the front door of Darcy House. Grabbing a robe, she peeked into the hallway, seeing Georgiana’s head pop out of her doorway as well.

Pounding steps ascended the stairs.

Shocked at seeing Colonel Fitzwilliam rushing toward her, Elizabeth wanted to faint. *William!* Something was wrong with her husband.

Before he could say a word, Elizabeth yelled to her sister, “Ready yourself, Georgiana.”

Looking at the colonel, she commanded, “Have a note sent to Dr. Ernest Cuthbert right away. He can travel with us.”

Slamming her door, Elizabeth threw off her robe as her maid scurried to help her dress and pack some garments for the journey to Kent.

Within an hour, they were racing from London, grateful for the skill of Darcy’s driver and the almost full moon.

Richard rode ahead of the carriage, a lantern in his hand. He knew the penalty should injury befall either Elizabeth or Georgiana. Darcy would never forgive him, nor would he ever forgive himself.

His and Darcy's arrival earlier that day had been heralded with the fanfare of a king's presence. Lady Catherine de Bourgh acted as if the prodigal son had returned to her home. She had completely ignored Richard, which was always his preference.

According to plan, he had the horse tied to the back of Darcy's carriage saddled. Within thirty minutes of their arrival at Rosings, Richard rode toward the western boundary to survey the fencing and the state of the tenant's cottages, and to gain a lovely view of the seashore. As usual, there would be little to report upon his return.

Meeting up with Darcy before they descended to the drawing room to await tea with their aunt, the two men compared notes. Very little changed from year to year at Rosings. This year appeared to be no different.

It was when they were seated and the tea was being served that the trouble began. Lady Catherine had placed her insipid daughter next to Darcy on a narrow sofa, bringing the two close together.

"Darcy, you have yet to compliment Anne on her improved health and looks. I can only believe your oversight was deliberate now that you have married someone far inferior to her in birth." Lady Catherine poked her spoon toward her nephew, spattering a few drops of her beverage on her skirt.

"Aunt Catherine, I believe Anne looks as I expected." Darcy glanced at his only female cousin before spearing his aunt with his stare. "I will let you know right now that neither my marriage nor my wife will be the subject of conversation while I am here. Am I clear on this, Aunt?"

Lady Catherine turned her full attention to her other nephew. "I suppose you have met this paragon, Richard. What was it about her that caused Darcy to lose all sense of duty? Is she a loose woman? *Oh, Lord!* Is she an actress from the stage? However is Darcy to know if the child she carries is actually his?"

Darcy carefully set his cup on the side table. Standing, he bowed to

Anne. "Pardon me, but it was a mistake to leave my dear wife for this viper's nest." Glancing at Richard, he said, "I depart for London at daybreak. Are you with me?"

"Am I not always?" the colonel replied.

The two men left the drawing room together.

When they arrived in the sitting room set aside for Darcy's use when he stayed at the estate, Darcy began pacing, muttering to himself about what an idiot he had been for leaving Elizabeth.

Richard poured himself a brandy. Without thought, he offered a drink to his cousin.

Shaking his head, Darcy continued to prowl the room. Richard was not concerned until he saw Darcy rub his chest.

"You are in pain?" he asked. "Elizabeth would not be happy."

At that comment, Darcy came to a standstill. Breathing in and out slowly, he moved to the chair next to Richard's.

"You are perfectly correct." Wiping his face with his hands, Darcy pulled them away to reveal a smile. "Oh, my Elizabeth can be a fierce woman if she thinks I am not taking good care. I can see my wife right now with her fist raised at Aunt Catherine, verbally castigating our esteemed relative for daring to raise my ire. Elizabeth would fight an army for me if she knew."

Richard grinned. "Then let us not tell her."

Their conversation was interrupted by a knock at the door. Thornton ushered in two footmen with trays covered with a meal.

"Cook heard the ruckus and sent these for you." The valet directed the trays set on the table in front of the gentlemen. "She had been determined to prepare your favorite sliced roast beef, cheese, and fruit to break your afternoon's fast. However, Lady Catherine insisted the shellfish she had delivered yesterday would be sufficient."

"Very well." Darcy dismissed the men from the room.

Everyone in the family knew Richard broke out in red bumps whenever he ate anything from the sea. So did their aunt Catherine. It was, in the colonel's opinion, more evidence of her currying favor with the master of Pemberley. She knew how much Darcy enjoyed seafood.

Looking over the offerings, Richard elected to eat the sweets Cook included on the tray. That and the brandy would fill him up and warm his insides.

Placing one of the oysters on his plate, Darcy speared the slimy bivalve with his fork, swallowing it down whole.

*Ugh!* Richard hated even the smell of them.

"Odd," Darcy commented as he wiped his mouth with a cloth. "Perhaps it has been because I have not had oysters in a long while that the taste seemed off. I do not believe I will have another."

Richard was grateful the tray could be removed from the room. Moving to the window, he shoved the glass open, allowing the spring air to infiltrate enough to remove the stench.

“Surely they taste as poorly as they smell.” Richard pinched his nostrils closed. “I cannot imagine how anyone could eat something with the fragrance of the Thames at low tide.”

Darcy chuckled. “Apparently, the oysters were too rich for my palate. I suggest we wait for Cook’s roast beef.”

Four hours later, Darcy was writhing in agony, the cramping in his abdomen sending him repeatedly to the chamber pot. When Richard spotted blood on Darcy’s handkerchief, he ran for his horse.

Never had he seen someone turn white then green as their stomach appeared to turn inside out. Richard knew without doubt that Darcy had not exaggerated his illness when he had initially informed him. But this...this was in every way horrid.

Darcy needed Elizabeth. Richard was determined to retrieve her.

---

Their arrival in Kent was met with silence. The hour was well after midnight, so a grand welcome was not expected. Elizabeth had only one concern, that of her husband. Throwing off her cloak and bonnet in the direction of Rosings’ butler, she followed Richard upstairs.

Georgiana had been quiet during the whole of the trip from London. Elizabeth heard the girl’s footsteps behind them as well as those of Dr. Cuthbert.

“Richard, once you direct us to William’s chambers, would you see to Georgiana, please?” Elizabeth directed.

Seeing Thornton coming from a room, Elizabeth broke from the others to hurry toward him. “How is he?”

Thornton’s appearance was telling. His clothing and hair were askew. Without saying a word, he reopened the door for her and the doctor to walk inside.

Darcy’s skin was as white as the sheets he was lying upon. Elizabeth rushed to his bedside.

“Oh, my darling husband.” She felt the clammy dampness of his brow. When his eyes opened, his orbs were glassy and opaque. Glancing at the doctor, she stepped back so the man could draw close.

Dr. Cuthbert first washed his hands in the basin, then approached. Pulling the bedclothes down, he ran his hand gently over Darcy’s abdomen. Immediately, her husband tensed in pain.

“How long ago did this start?” Dr. Cuthbert directed his attention to Thornton.

“It has been almost eight hours since his body began purging

itself,” the valet replied. “I should tell you, sir, that Mr. Darcy will not accept bleeding or further purging from you or any physician. He saw what it did to his father.”

The doctor nodded, then asked, “Has he been able to take any fluids?”

“He has been able to keep small amounts of water down, sir.”

“Is anyone else in the household affected with the same conditions?”

“Yes, sir,” Thornton replied. “Miss Anne de Bourgh, who also consumed the seafood, passed away approximately three hours ago. The apothecary overseeing her health was called for at the first sign of the symptoms. The man purged and bled Miss de Bourgh in an attempt to rid her of ill humors.”

Elizabeth was crushed to hear of the loss of Darcy’s cousin.

“Any others?” Dr. Cuthbert insisted.

“No, sir. Lady Catherine and Colonel Fitzwilliam are both unable to eat seafood so are unscathed.”

“Then this is as I suspect: a poisoning from tainted food.” As the doctor spoke, he felt the pulse at Darcy’s wrist, pulled back each eyelid to examine his eyes, then placed his ear on Darcy’s chest. “For a certainty, Mr. Darcy has purged enough. I would never make his condition worse by doing more. I do not hold to the practice of bleeding. My experience is that individuals need all the blood they can get. Therefore, the best treatment will be to continue assisting Mr. Darcy to drink. There are several dangers we know of that are exacerbated by his stomach ailment. It is imperative that we keep him hydrated.”

“Is there not some medication we could give him to ease his way?” Elizabeth asked, unaware that tears were trailing down her cheeks.

“I brought along some bottles in my case,” Dr. Cuthbert answered. “My suggestion to you, Mrs. Darcy, is that you rest. This distress is not good for either you or the babe.”

“That will *not* happen,” Elizabeth immediately answered.

She had no intention of moving from her husband’s side.

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The next week was the worst of Elizabeth’s life. It took four days of Elizabeth, Dr. Cuthbert, Richard, and Georgiana constantly giving Darcy water before he regained enough strength that he could sit up and drink by himself. For two of those days, blood continued to spatter his linens. His battered insides could tolerate only drops of bone broth, lukewarm tea, and cool water for another three days. On the tenth day, Dr. Cuthbert let his impatient patient get out of bed to

sit on the sofa next to the window.

Her husband's aunt did not attempt to see either of her nephews until that day.

"Darcy, I am pleased to see you improved in health," she mumbled from where she stood just inside the door. "You heard of my Anne?"

Darcy nodded, his hand reaching for Elizabeth's.

"I cannot imagine something tainted coming from *my* kitchen. There had to be another factor at work here."

Although she did not verbalize her thoughts, the glare Lady Catherine gave Elizabeth set the younger woman's teeth on edge. The shrew thought she had caused this misery? Absurd!

"Lady Catherine," Elizabeth squeezed her husband's fingers, before she added, "pray accept our sincere condolences for the loss of your daughter. Whatever we can do that is within our power and authority to ease your way, pray consider it done."

Elizabeth felt she was being generous. Lady Catherine apparently took exception to each word.

"You will both leave my house never to return." Focusing on Darcy, she added, "I have changed my will. Rosings Park will not see a Darcy living here, ever. Instead, I am leaving my estate to Richard. *He* would have married Anne had I asked. *He* has never caused me any difficulty. *He* has never brought a woman like..." Lady Catherine's arthritic finger pointed at Elizabeth. "Richard would never bring a female like her into my home."

Darcy roused himself to speak. "Aunt, you will leave us now."

Unexpectedly, Lady Catherine spun around and left the room. Both Darcy and Elizabeth breathed a sigh of relief.

Sitting on the sofa beside him, the doctor, Richard, and Georgiana also departed, Richard winking at the couple before closing the door.

"My dearest husband, when you first showed me the letter from Lady Catherine weeks ago, I thought her ridiculous. Now I cannot seem to come up with a word to adequately describe her. Can you?"

She grinned when Darcy rested his temple on her shoulder, the better to kiss her on her neck. Tilting her head to stop the exquisite torture, she kissed him on the forehead, using her lips to feel the temperature of his skin. The paleness was gone. In its place was a much healthier pink hue.

"Let us not speak of my aunt, my lovely Elizabeth." Darcy continued with his gentle caresses to her skin. "I have something far more important to tell you."

"You do?" Elizabeth smiled. "In an odd circumstance, I have something to tell you as well."

"Allow me to go first this time, my bride." Darcy sat erect, then pulled her toward him so her head rested alongside his.

“I will allow it this time only, my dear,” Elizabeth teased.

“During the worst of my illness, one regret ate at me worse than whatever was causing my physical torment. I vowed to myself to correct my oversight as soon as I was able. I even pleaded with God to have me survive so I could complete this important task.” Arranging himself so he was kneeling in front of her, he took her hands in his. “Mrs. Elizabeth Darcy, you have become my world. You have given my life a purpose. You are more precious to me than the finest diamonds. You hold my heart in your capable hands. Your heart has taught mine how to beat properly. I love you, my wife. I love you more today than I did when we were first wed. I sincerely suspect my love will continue to grow until we are old and grey. If we were not already wed, I would beg you to marry me this instant. Would you say yes, my Elizabeth?”

She sighed at the beauty of his words.

“Mr. Fitzwilliam Darcy, do you not know that you own my heart, that it beats alone for you and our child? Yes, I would marry you this instant, you dear man. For my love for you flows as steadily as a river to the ocean and is as vast as the seven seas that surround the earth. I will love you until we are so old our children and grandchildren will need to see to our care.”

Their kiss robbed each of them of breath.

Two days later, they left Rosings Park. The Darcys did not return for five years. Lady Catherine, had she not died of apoplexy the year before, would have been most displeased at their staying in her home.



**B**lood!

Everywhere Darcy looked there was the evidence of his wife's labor and his daughter's birth.

Despite the insistence of Dr. Cuthbert and the midwives, Darcy had not let his wife out of his sight during the whole of her travails. As his staff cleaned the room, the doctor closed his bag after his final examination.

Elizabeth was a marvel, but so must every husband believe when his wife presented him with a child borne of their love.

Holding the baby close to him, Darcy checked out his little girl's features. In truth, she looked exactly like her two older brothers had when they were born—wrinkled, with wisps of hair on their heads, invisible eyebrows, and skinny legs. Nonetheless, in his eyes, her beauty rivaled a queen's. She was stunning.

When she opened her eyes and gazed at him, Darcy fought tears. Neither of his sons had affected him to this extent. Oh, he loved his boys dearly. But this little girl? With one breath, with one gaze, she captured his heart. He feared she would never let it go.

"William," Elizabeth whispered from where she reclined in the bed, "I am pleased we have a girl. Are you?"

How could he put into words the emotions pouring through him? He nodded instead.

For a long time, he held his daughter. This one was far quieter than the other two had been.

Their eldest, Bennet Fitzwilliam Darcy, had come out from his mother's womb complaining about his changed circumstances. Their second son, Richard Charles Darcy, had waited until his father held him in his arms only to insist that he would rather be with his mother.

This babe, his little girl, was exactly where she needed to be, held by her Papa.

Elizabeth reached over to touch their daughter's cheek. "Darling, how much has changed for us since the beginning. You, who needed an heir, now have three children. I am so pleased with our family, with you being here to guide, direct, and train our sons. Now you will have a baby girl to spoil. I foresee she will believe herself to be a

princess before long.”

He laughed softly, not wanting to disturb the babe. “Perhaps, my wife, she will be the pirate queen to her brothers. Or maybe she will be Gulliver or one of the Lilliputians.”

“Perhaps.”

When the babe began to squirm and whimper, Elizabeth reached for her daughter.

Darcy was bereft at letting the little one go. Knowing what needed to happen, he kissed his wife and newest child. His next task was to inform their sons that they had a sister.

The news was greeted with shocking indifference.

“We wanted another brother,” insisted seven-year-old Bennet. “Uncle Richard and Aunt Susan are unfair. They had two boys at one time both times they picked out babies. They have four! We need two more boys before we next travel to see them. Pray, Papa, take this baby girl back where you got her and bring at least one more boy to Pemberley. It would only be the fair thing to do.”

“It would, would it?” Darcy ruffled his son’s hair. “I am frightfully sorry to tell you, then, that the new baby is Miss Margaret Elizabeth Darcy. She will not be going anywhere. She will remain.”

His youngest son scuffed his shoe on the carpet. “Aw, Papa, ‘tis no fair!”

Darcy kept himself from smiling when he looked at little Richie’s stockings. They did not match. Neither did his shoes. One was black, the other brown. At four years old, the boy was as precocious as his mother and as unwilling to accept help as his father.

“Do not worry, sons, you will become used to her in time.”

“Is she little like Richie was?” Bennet inquired.

“She is.”

“Aw, that really is not fair.”

Thinking quickly, Darcy offered his disgruntled boys, “What you two may not have considered is the benefit to you of having a sister. Why, from this day forward, you will have a damsel to rescue in your outdoor games, a young lady who you will always be older and faster than when you play.”

Both boys’ eyes sparkled with delight. As they ran from the room to return to their nurse, who would escort them to see their new sister, Darcy felt a tightness in his chest.

Unconcerned, he knew the exact cause of his affliction. During the eight years he and Elizabeth had been together, her constant surveillance over his diet had benefited him greatly. He avoided shellfish like the plague and never sampled food or drink that stirred the acids inside of him to erupt.

No, what caused this sense that his chest was about to explode was

the fullness of his love for his family. Never, when he began this journey with Elizabeth, had he imagined his joy would increase with each day, with each second of time spent with her. As each child arrived, Darcy's pleasure was magnified exponentially.

With delight, Darcy had observed the same happen to Charles and Jane Bingley, who now lived an hour away in Derbyshire with their brood.

Elizabeth's father continued to be a regular correspondent and visitor to the north of England. He and his wife were favorites with all their grandchildren.

Lord and Lady Matlock, out of love for Richard's sons, extended their affection for Darcy's boys as well. Both Bennet and Richie called them Grandpapa and Grandmama, to the delight of the older couple.

Less than a year prior, Richard and Susan chose to sell Rosings Park to an investor. Settling themselves in an estate between Matlock and Pemberley, they were frequently in company with the Darcys.

No, this pressure in his chest was not worrisome. It was welcome.

Hearing the whooping yells from upstairs, Darcy decided to join his family. No longer did he have reason for dread. When it came to the future, he had reason to hope.

The End

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From the Author:

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Christie Capps is the pen name of a best-selling author J Dawn King who, because of increasing demands on her time, has fewer and fewer hours to read. She doubts she is the only one with these circumstances. Therefore, her Christie Capps stories will all be approximately 100 pages of sweet romance and will be priced less than one cup of flavored coffee from your local barista.

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Thank you very much!

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